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ON JUSTIFICATION,

A Sermon,

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Rom. v. 1, 2.—"*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom also we have access by faith unto this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*"

No subject in the range of human thought is more important or interesting than that of our relationship to God. The fountain of all power and prerogative as he is, He can kill and make alive; can build up and pull down; can exalt to heaven and depress to hell. His favour therefore is life, and his loving kindness better than life.

The scriptures, viewing the subject in this light, have exhibited with great clearness the nature of that relationship in which the dignity and happiness of man consist. This relationship, they assure us, is one of justification and peace. Being justified by faith, we have *peace* with God through our Lord Jesus Christ; by whom we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

I. The term justification originally signified the declaring or pronouncing an individual righteous according to law. In the holy scriptures, it generally means the pardon of sin, and the restoration of a guilty person to the favour of God. The term, however, even in the volume of inspiration, is susceptible of various interpretations. St. Paul, in several instances, applied it to the whole world. "As by the offence of one, judgment came

upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." Having, by the delinquency of their first parents, become the subjects of condemnation, mankind were rescued from this condition by the redemption of Jesus Christ. "There is one God, and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself a ransom for *all* to be testified in due time." He, by the sacrifice of himself upon the cross, became a "propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the *whole world*." Paying, in his own person, the forfeiture of the first offence, he threw open the prison doors, and said unto the captives, "Go forth." This, according to the tenor of the new Testament, is "a free gift, which came upon *all* men unto justification of life."

Another kind of justification was alluded to by our Saviour in his sermon on the mount. "By thy words," said he, "thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned." In the day of final judgment, every individual being judged according to the deeds done in the body, the righteous will receive the sentence of "Well done thou good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord." The righteous, in this event, will stand justified, not only in the sight of God, but also in the sight of man. Every intelligent being in the universe will acquiesce in their acquittal, from a full conviction of its equity and righteousness.

Distinct, however, from the atonement and the final acceptance of the righteous, in the day of judgment, is the justification mentioned in the text. This signifies an act of grace, by which God pardons the sinner, and accepts him as righteous for the sake of Jesus Christ. It implies, saith Bishop Horne, a prisoner at the bar, a law by which he is to be tried, a witness to accuse him, and a Judge to pass sentence. The prisoner is guilty man, the rule by which he is to be tried is the law of God, the witness that is to accuse him is his conscience, the Judge is Jesus Christ, and justification is an act of his, absolving the prisoner from his sins, and restoring him to the favour of God.

When the eyes of our understanding are enlightened by the grace of God, and we are enabled to behold our character in its true light—when we realize the fact that we were conceived in sin, and brought forth in iniquity, and that, by wicked works, we have rendered ourselves guilty in the sight of heaven—and when, impelled by this view, we throw ourselves by faith entirely upon the merits of Jesus Christ for pardon and salvation, we are justified freely from all things from which we could not be justified by the law of Moses. Our sins, which were as a cloud, and our transgressions which were as a thick cloud, are blotted out, and there is, therefore, now no condemnation to us who are in Christ Jesus; for the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made us free from the law of sin and death. The language of our heart now is, "O Lord, I will praise thee, for though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortest me."

II. Respecting the ground on which justification is obtained, there has been, and now is, a great diversity of opinion—

For, many have supposed that this ground is the merit of their own works; and the supposition is so congenial to the carnal mind, and the perceptions of unawakened sinners, that a successful exhibition of its absurdity is a task of no easy accomplishment. Common, however, as the error is, and difficult as its removal often proves to be, it is one of the most injurious heresies that ever was embraced by the mind of man. Not only is it destitute of truth, but it strikes at the very existence of the Gospel system. It is the bane of piety—the essence of infidelity, and the very Judas Iscariot of Christianity. As we value the salvation of our souls we should as scrupulously exclude this heresy from our creed.

For not only are our supposedly good works inadequate to procure justification in the sight of God, but they are, in the eye of justice, the cause of increasing guilt. Every duty that we attempt, is so imperfectly performed, it is necessarily offensive in the sight of God. The deficiency of purity in our motives, of ardour in our feelings, and of constancy in our efforts, renders the righteousness of our best performances, in the language of inspiration, worthless as "filthy rags." Let him who doubts the

correctness of this statement advert to the history of his own feelings, and if he be impartial, he will soon see that his best acts can have no merit. In prayer, the wandering of his thoughts, the feebleness of his faith, and the languor of his zeal, prove that in his performance there is no merit;—in almsgiving, a desire to let his right hand know what his left hand doeth, or, in other words, to secure the praise of men more than the praise of God, shows the selfishness of this act; in public worship the want of reverence, of humility, and of love for the divine majesty, indicates the deficiency of his endeavours in this respect; in reading the holy scriptures, the absence of that faith, which, penetrating the mysteries of futurity, brings them before the imagination in the vividness of reality, demonstrates the imperfectness of this exercise. In every act, indeed, he will discover such a want of perfectness, and such a mixture of impurity, such a dereliction from the standard of Christian holiness, that the idea of merit must be for ever annihilated. His repentance needs to be repented of, and his faith to be sprinkled with the blood of expiation. In every thing he is defective, and in many things he offends all. Not a thought, nor a word, nor an action of his life has ever been as it should have been. His best performances, compared with the law of God, bear upon them the marks of condemnation. For surely, if the Almighty charges his angels with folly, and heaven itself is impure in his sight, the wretched efforts of mortal man cannot be perfect.

And even if they were perfect, they cannot atone for our *past* sins. The time certainly has been in which we were neglectful of our duty, and to satisfy the demand of the divine law for this delinquency, is utterly out of our power. Should an individual who has long lived in the performance of his social duties; who had fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and given drink to the thirsty; who had done to others as he would in a change of circumstances be done by, in some unguarded moment, yield to the temptations of the wicked one, and commit felony; and should he be arrested, arraigned, and put upon his trial, his overt act proved, and he pronounced guilty, it would manifestly be unavailing for him to plead, in arrest of judgment, the innocence of his

past life; to say that since the commission of the fatal deed, he had lived blameless, and that, henceforth, he intends to live in compliance with his country's laws. He is guilty in their sight; the damning charge is fixed upon his conscience and his character, and all that he ever did, or can do, is not sufficient to obliterate its odium. And such, precisely is our case. Be the innocence of our present, and portions of our past life what they may, it is evident that we *have* sinned, and that no efforts that we can make, can atone for the delinquency. The declaration of the Apostle that "by the deeds of the law shall no flesh be justified, for by the law is the knowledge of sin," stands forth unrevoked, and irrevocable. And emanating as it does, from the divine nature, "heaven and earth shall pass away, but not one jot nor tittle" of the declaration shall ever fail.

Under the conviction of this fact, many run into the opposite extreme. Believing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, they repose their hopes of pardon merely on a *speculative* faith. Because they believe in the divinity of the holy scriptures, and have no confidence in their own works, they conclude that they are justified with God. But this error is no less offensive in his sight than the one we have just noticed. To admit the divinity of the holy scriptures is not enough. "The devils believe and tremble." Any degree of faith that does not work by love and purify the heart, is utterly unavailing. To prove this, in opposition to the teachings of the Gnostics, St. James devoted the greater portion of his Epistle. "What," says he, "doth it profit though a man say he hath faith, and hath not works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also." The supposition, that a simple admission of the divinity of Christianity is sufficient to justify us in the sight of God, is adverse to the whole system of redemption. Myriads, in all ages, have wrecked their eternal hopes upon this

fatal rock, and if we are not careful, we shall experience the same fate. The truth ought to sink *deep* into our hearts, that that faith which is not operative, which does not unite us vitally to the son of God, and produce in us a conformity with his example is not saving.

But, in avoiding the errors we have already noticed, many run into another. In the pursuit of justification, they depend upon the grace of God, and their own performances, as co-efficient agents. Believing that God is merciful, they hope that after doing all they can do, he will do the rest; that notwithstanding the imperfectness of their performance, he will, considering the sincerity of their intention, not be strict to mark their iniquity, but that, in the plenitude of his goodness, he will blot out their transgressions. This error, of all others, is not improbably the most dangerous. Consisting of a combination of truth and error as it does, it is not only plausible, but seductive. The subject of this error, convinced of the inadequacy of his own works to atone for his delinquency, resorts to the mercy of God; but he forgets that "God out of Christ is a consuming fire." For the extinguishment of his debts, he endeavours to effect a compromise, resolving to pay all he can by his own efforts, and to trust in the divine mercy for the remission of the rest. But against this system of compromise St. Paul directs his most powerful reprehension. "If by grace ye are saved," saith he, "then it is no more of works. Otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then it is no more of grace. Otherwise work is no more work."

But whatever may be the contradictory opinion of human beings, in regard to the ground of our justification, the voice of the holy scriptures upon this subject, is distinct and uniform. Jesus Christ and the merits of his cross are every where represented as the *only* basis of acceptance in the sight of God. "There is no name given under heaven," saith an apostle, "whereby we must be saved, but the name of Jesus of Nazareth, other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." In unison with this language, the spirits of just men made perfect, now in heaven, ascribe salvation exclusively to the merits of the son of God. "Unto him," say they,

"who loved us, and washed us in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests to God and his Father, to Him be glory and dominion, for ever and ever." And while this fact is the subject of unceasing praise in Heaven, it is no less distinctly stated by the church on earth. "We are accounted righteous before God," saith she, "only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings."

The righteousness of Jesus Christ *alone*, is the basis of our acceptance in the sight of God. He, in the language of holy scripture, is "the way, the truth, the life." Exclusive of that atonement which was made by the shedding of the blood of Christ, we shall inevitably perish. Every other means will be utterly unavailing. Our cries, and prayers, and efforts for restoring mercy, if not bottomed upon the satisfaction of the cross, will but aggravate our condemnation. Christ only is the foundation on which "if any man build, he shall be likened to a man who built his house upon a rock, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house, and it fell not, for it was founded upon a rock."

III. Having exhibited the true ground of our justification in the sight of God, we will proceed, thirdly, to consider the instrument by which it is obtained.

This is Faith—"Being justified *by faith*, we have peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ."

This faith, however, is not merely an assent to the gospel system as a rational and consistent plan, but a vigorous, and firm belief of the record which God has given of his son:—a confidence in the willingness and sufficiency of Jesus Christ, to save to the uttermost all who come unto him:—an absolute abandonment of every hope and of every wish to obtain pardon, and salvation, but by the merits of the cross:—the substance of things hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen:—a vital and consolatory belief that God, on account of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, freely, fully, and absolutely remits our sins, and restores us to his favour.

On this subject, among the writers of the New Testament, there is a perfect and uniform agreement. Though St. Paul asserts that we are justified by faith, without the deeds of the law,

and St. James, "that a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone," there is not the slightest discrepancy in the statements. The meaning of the former is, that a man is justified by faith in Jesus Christ, antecedent to a conformity with the requirements of the law, as Abraham was, before the law was given; and the meaning of the latter is, that we are not justified by that faith which is dead and unproductive of good works, but by that, which is the well-spring of obedience to the law of Christ. Instead, therefore, of a contradiction in the views of these apostles, there is perfect harmony: they both declare that we are justified by the same principle, but St. Paul speaks of that principle in the *abstract*, and St. James of its *effects*.

We are then justified by faith in the merits of Jesus Christ; by that living, operative principle, which, inducing us to flee from the condemning sentence of the law, inclines us to seek for safety only in the transactions of the cross.

IV. Such, then, being the instrument of our justification, we will proceed, lastly, to notice its accompaniments. These, as enumerated in the text, are peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ—access to the throne of divine grace—and standing and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.

Having believed in the Lord Jesus Christ with a heart unto righteousness; taken him for our Saviour, our *only* Saviour; our ample and all-sufficient Saviour, we experience the peace of God which passeth all understanding. According to the terms of the New Covenant, we are not only pardoned, but restored to the divine favour, and made heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Our conscience, sprinkled with the blood of expiation, possesses a peace which the world can neither give nor take away. The Godhead smiling through the medium of the cross, whispers to our hearts, "thy sins, which were many, are all forgiven thee, arise and go in peace, and sin no more." O blessed peace! the sweetest and richest gift of God to man, and the strongest proof of his forgiving love, may we possess it, in every period of our being; may we, amid the sorrows and tribulations of the present life, and especially in that awful and tremendous hour, when entering the dark valley and shadow of death, find it to comfort and sustain

us; may we then experience the fulfilment of the Redeemer's promise, "my peace I give unto you, not as the world giveth, give I unto you."

Access to the throne of grace is another accompaniment of the divine forgiveness. Pardoned and brought near to God by the blood of Christ, we realize, in every emergency, that his ears are opened to our prayers, and his hands are ready to minister to our wants. When hated, persecuted, and bowed down with sorrow and tribulation, in coming to the throne of Grace, we always obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. Our hearts are cheered with the divine presence, our eyes wiped with the hand of forgiving kindness, and our conscience assured that if we ask we shall receive, that if we seek we shall find, and that if we knock at the door of mercy, it will be opened to us. And when we know not what we should pray for as we ought, he gives us his holy spirit to help our infirmities, and to make intercessions for us, with groanings that cannot be uttered.

To these accompaniments of justification may be added standing and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God, or in other words, steadfastness in our spiritual feelings, growing out of expectations founded on the divine promises. The influence that divine grace imparts to believers in Christ Jesus, if properly cherished, renders them "steadfast and unmoveable." St. Paul tells us of some who had trials of cruel mockings, and scourgings, yea, moreover, of bonds and imprisonment; who were stoned; were sawn asunder; were tempted; were slain with the sword; but who, in spite of all their afflictions, remained steadfast unto death. They were conquerors, and more than conquerors, through him who loved them and gave himself for them. In possession of this steadfastness he exclaimed, "I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And while the justified stand with firmness in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made them free, they rejoice with joy un-

speakable and full of glory. Confidently relying upon the promises of their Heavenly Father, they anticipate a speedy, and eternal deliverance from all their sorrows. Amid the crosses and afflictions of the present life, religion, the soother of their cares, in language sweet as heavenly harmony, hushes their impassioned soul to peace. Reposing their animated hopes upon the promises of Christ, they look with triumph beyond the limits of their woes. Standing upon Pisgah's lofty summit, they behold, by faith, the promised land, and exclaim with Simeon, "now Lord, lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation."

Such, briefly, are the nature, foundation, instruments, and accompaniments of justification; and the inquiry should be instituted by every individual, whether he is the subject of it or not. And, in prosecuting the inquiry, we should recollect that such, in the sight of God, is the importance of being justified, that without it, every thing else will be unavailing. All the refinement of taste and intellect; all the artificial rectitude of social and moral conduct; all our orthodoxy and zeal for Christianity; and all we may have done, or can do, without remission of sins, and a restoration to the favour of God, will be useless.

So sure as we now exist; and so certain as our present mode of existence will terminate, if we die without being "justified by faith in Jesus Christ," we shall perish for ever! The language of the judge to us in the great day of account will be, "I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity." And under this sentence we shall "go away into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels."

Let us, then, seek, with our whole heart, the inestimable blessing of justification in the sight of God. Let us come to the cross of Christ, and repose upon its merits, all our hopes and solicitudes. No matter what may have been our past sins:—we may have been ungrateful for the most ample and endearing goodness, and reckless of the most solemn and impressive admonitions; may have drawn iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope; may have called evil good, and good evil; put dark-

ness for light, and light for darkness; been wise in our own eyes, and prudent in our own sight; but the moment we renounce all dependance upon our own works, and simply, and entirely rely upon the assurance of the gospel, that God is in Christ, reconciling the world to himself—we shall be forgiven; shall realize that "by grace we are saved through faith, and that, not of ourselves, it is the gift of God."

FAITH.

Should famine o'er the mourning field
Extend its desolating reign,
Nor spring her blooming beauties yield
Nor autumn swell the golden grain:

Should lowing herds, and bleating sheep,
Around their famish'd master die;
And hope itself despairing weep,
While life deplores its last supply

Amid the dark, the dismal scene,
If I can say the Lord is mine,
The joy shall triumph o'er the pain,
And glory dawn, tho' life decline.

The God of my salvation lives,
My nobler life he will sustain;
His word immortal vigour gives,
Nor shall my glorious hopes be vain.

Thy presence, Lord, can cheer my heart,
Tho' every earthly comfort die;
Thy smile can bid my pains depart,
And raise my sacred pleasures high.

O let me hear thy blissful voice,
Inspiring life and joys divine!
The barren desert shall rejoice,
'Tis paradise if thou art mine.

CONFIDENCE IN GOD.

Altho' the vine its fruit deny,
Altho' the olive yield no oil;
The with'ring fig tree droop and die,
The field illude the tiller's toil;—

Altho' the stall no herd afford,
And perish all the bleating race;
Yet will I triumph in the Lord!—
The God of my salvation praise!—

Tho' comfortless my soul remain,
And not a gleam of light appear;
Tho' joy be sought and sought in vain,
And tho' despair itself be near:

Altho' assurance all be lost,
And blooming hopes cut off I see·
Yet will I in my Saviour trust,
And glory that he died for me.

In hope—believing against hope—
My int'rest still in God I claim;
His gracious word shall lift me up,
Salvation is in Jesus' name.

Soon shall he bring deliv'rance nigh,
And my dejected soul shall find,
When he shall lift my comforts high,
His arm how strong, his heart how kind,